

**Prepared Statement of Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell**

**Vice Chairman - Senate Committee on Indian Affairs**

**Oversight Hearing on**

**"The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996"**

**May 10, 2002**

---

Good morning and thank you Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for holding this oversight hearing on the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*, better known as “welfare reform”. By now we are all-too-familiar with the poor economic conditions in Indian communities:

- a jobless rate of 45%, and a rate of 80-90% in the Plains Tribes’ economies;
- a reservation “brain drain” of our brightest Indian youth; and
- an anemic reservation economic base in which Indian people cannot get good jobs.

And, as you know Mr. Chairman, despite some recent success with Indian gaming, natural resource development, and other business opportunities, most of Indian America suffers from an unemployment rate that is five to ten times the national average.

The welfare reform act was a landmark achievement when it was signed into law in 1996. It requires the Department of Health and Human Services to authorize and assist Indian tribes in establishing their own, unique welfare systems and rules to match the unique circumstances of reservation geographies and tribal economies.

In some respects, the welfare reform act is modeled after the successful Indian Self Determination and Tribal Self Governance Acts.

For the first time, Indian tribes are authorized to design, implement and administer their own tribal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programs.

For the first time, Indian tribes receive direct funding to design welfare programs that were tailored to the rural and economically depressed nature of Indian country.

Now, 6 years later as we revisit the welfare reform act, the tribes are telling us that there can administer these programs and administer them well.

The tribes are also telling us that they do not stand shoulder to shoulder with the States when it comes to receiving technical assistance and other “capacity-building” resources that have been made available to the States for decades.

These funding inequities are preventing the tribes from making full, best use of the TANF program and in turn from helping their members transition from welfare to work.

I believe that in administering welfare reform, Congress and Indian tribes must work together to enhance opportunities in Native economies and provide job opportunities to Indian people.

That, Mr. Chairman, is real welfare reform.

In reauthorizing the welfare reform act, we should perfect it and make sure that it helps a tribal member with the services he or she needs to get and keep a job. Its that simple.

With that, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

\* \* \*